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LETTER DATED 16 JANUARY 1996 FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to refer to my letter of 29 December 1995 (S/1995/1068), in which I informed the President of the Security Council, inter alia, that I had asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mrs. Sadako Ogata, to travel immediately to Bujumbura as my personal envoy in order to discuss with the Government authorities, at the highest level, steps that might be taken on an urgent basis to defuse the situation and enable international organizations to function effectively.

I also have the honour to refer to the statement made by the President of the Security Council on 5 January 1996 (S/PRST/1996/1), in which the Council noted the proposals referred to in the above-mentioned letter and stated that it would consider these and other proposals I may submit in the light of the reports of Mrs. Ogata's mission and from my Special Representative in Burundi.

Mrs. Ogata visited Burundi from 7 to 8 January 1996. She met the President of the Republic, Mr. Sylvestre Ntibantunganya; the President of the National Assembly, Mr. Léonce Ngendakumana; the Prime Minister, Mr. Antoine Nduwayo; the Minister of External Relations and Cooperation, Mr. Vénérand Bakevyumusaya; the Minister of Interior and Public Security, Mr. Sylvestre Banzubaze; the Minister of National Defence, Lt.-Col. Firmin Sinzoyiheba; and the Minister of Reinsertion of the Displaced and the Returnees, Mrs. Claudine Matuturo. She also had consultations with representatives of diplomatic missions, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the International Commission of Inquiry and the Organization of African Unity (OAU). During most of these meetings, Mrs. Ogata was accompanied by my Special Representative, Mr. Marc Faguy, as well as the United Nations Resident Coordinator, who is also the designated official for security.

Members of the Council will recall that Mrs. Ogata's trip was preceded by a number of attacks against the staff of United Nations agencies and NGOs working in Burundi, which had brought humanitarian assistance to a virtual halt in large parts of the country. It is widely believed in Burundi that these attacks were planned as a means of forcing expatriate personnel to leave certain areas and of removing potential witnesses.

These incidents, however, must be seen in the wider context of the deterioration of the security situation in the country as a whole. In a climate of growing radicalization, extremists from the two main ethnic groups in the country are engaged in a round of violence that includes selective killings, massacres of civilians and the destruction of national economic assets and infrastructure. The already fragile Convention of Government is coming under increasing attack, while the polarization of State institutions, particularly the security forces, is growing. Burundian officials at the highest level, on both sides of the ethnic divide, refer to their country as being in a "state of civil war" and accuse other parties of being engaged in "ethnic cleansing".

It appears that there are two conflicting views among the Burundian leadership. On the one hand, there are those who are determined to launch an all-out military offensive against some of the armed factions. It is these elements which are most opposed to the concept of international military intervention or preventive deployment. On the other hand, there are those who advocate a wider political dialogue, including negotiations with the extremist movements, and who welcome the idea of an external military presence which might help to stabilize the situation.

Mrs. Ogata has reported to me that the continuation of humanitarian aid is essential to address the needs of Burundian nationals and foreign refugees affected by more than two years of uninterrupted regional turmoil. Should the security situation deteriorate to the point that humanitarian activities had to be completely suspended, the consequences in terms of human lives, health, sanitation and general welfare, as well as population displacements, could well lead to a massive emergency situation that would further destabilize both Burundi and the entire Great Lakes region.

While the Burundian authorities and security forces must clearly be held responsible for the safety and support of United Nations and other personnel engaged in humanitarian activities, the United Nations can take additional measures to improve the security of personnel. Mrs. Ogata has recommended that the following steps be taken:

(a) The urgent dispatch of a technical security mission to examine ways to improve existing security arrangements, including the limited deployment of United Nations guards to protect United Nations personnel and premises;

(b) Expanded application of the Convention of Safety of the United Nations and Associated Personnel to cover United Nations activities in Burundi;

(c) Closer cooperation between the United Nations and the military observers of OAU, who might be able to perform liaison functions between the humanitarian community and the Burundian security forces.

During her visit, Mrs. Ogata sought a commitment by the Prime Minister of Burundi to the establishment of a standing mechanism of consultation on security issues between the Government, the United Nations and NGOs. The Prime Minister publicly announced his full agreement with the proposal and a preparatory meeting between the United Nations and NGOs has already been held in order to define a common position to be discussed with the Government.

The assurances obtained from the Government of Burundi and the adoption of the measures outlined above could help to defuse the security situation and allow international humanitarian organizations to function more effectively. It would be unrealistic, however, to expect these measures to have any real impact on the fundamental problems of the country. This is why I continue to believe that it is imperative for the international community to launch a major initiative to prevent another tragedy in the subregion, as well as to promote a dialogue embracing all the elements of the Burundian political spectrum. I have instructed my Special Representative for Burundi to explore urgently with Burundian leaders how such a dialogue might be established, possibly under United Nations auspices. I shall be reverting to the Security Council on this matter in the coming days. Meanwhile, I have the honour to refer, once again, to my letter of 29 December 1995.

I should be grateful if you could bring the contents of the present letter to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(Signed) Boutros BOUTROS-GHALI